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# The Home and the Housewife: Kathryn Davis and Contemporary Domestic Spaces

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The Home and the Housewife:  
Kathryn Davis and Contemporary Domestic Spaces

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28 March 2011

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*Table of Contents*

Abstract	ii
Introduction	1 – 9
<i>Hell</i>	9 – 22
<i>The Walking Tour</i>	22 – 34
<i>The Thin Place</i>	34 – 46
Conclusion	46 – 48

### *Abstract*

Kathryn Davis holds a marginal position in the current literary canon, having received little critical recognition for her six experimental novels. This thesis will explore three of her texts, *Hell* (1998), *The Walking Tour* (1999), and *The Thin Place* (2006), as innovative commentaries on domestic space and women's relationship to this space in a contemporary world. Davis' works engage with the highly complicated and controversial concept of "the domestic" as well as women's ongoing negotiation with this contested space. In order to analyze how Davis creates and revises the homes and the female characters in her novels, this thesis will apply both feminist and postmodern theories of space and home to her works. These theories will elucidate Davis' interpretation of the pertinent postmodern and feminist concerns regarding how to live in a world of inversion, uncertainty and infinite possibility. This thesis will argue that Davis deconstructs domestic spaces that limit women to the role of housewife, revealing the problems inherent within the patriarchal model of private spheres. With the uncomfortable and oppressive realities of the traditional relationship between homes and women laid bare, Davis struggles to conceptualize a new home, a home that both functions in an ever-evolving late postmodern world that also promotes women's agency. Through three of her novels that all address this problem, Davis' view of the domestic shifts from hopeless destruction, to infinite imagination, to her final answer: a home built on communal relationships with nature and spirituality that provides women with active, meaningful subjectivity.

## *Introduction*

### Kathryn Davis and Contemporary Culture

Kathryn Davis began her writing career in the 1980s, forging a rebellious and subversive style that diverged from contemporary literary trends, resulting in limited reviews and analyses of her works. The three books that this thesis will focus on reveal the extent of the polarized responses to her work, stretching from confusion to admiration. *Hell*, one of her early and by far her most experimental novel, ran into criticism before it was even published. Davis states that the editor she previously worked with responded to *Hell* “[i]n a bad way. He sort of didn’t want to have anything to do with it” (Davis, “An Interview with Kathryn Davis”). Eventually, years after Davis completed the novel, Ecco published it and readers began to puzzle over the complicated book. In a review of the novel for the *New York Times*, Nancy Willard notes that “[f]or all its intelligence...Davis's new novel will not please everyone, especially not those readers who like their fiction readily accessible” (Willard). Willard herself seems confounded by the story, resorting to vaguely summarizing the plot rather than offering a direct opinion of the work or its themes. She ignores the more challenging elements intrinsic to Davis’ style, such as temporal confusion and multiple, unnamed narrators, turning her review into an incomplete plot summary. Willard, though she praises Davis’ innovative techniques, falls victim to Davis’ intentionally complicated plot lines and diction, failing to offer a compelling criticism of *Hell*.

The confused opinions of Davis and her work persist through her more contemporary novels, both *The Walking Tour* and *The Thin Place*, keeping Davis on the fringe of critical acclaim. *The Walking Tour* is the only novel by Davis to receive any published critical analysis, appearing in *Late Postmodernism* by Jeremy Green in a discussion of the growing tension between new technology and literature. Despite this attention, the book received perplexed

reviews from critics. Edwin Frank, writing for the *Boston Review*, states with veiled frustration that “Davis takes what would seem to be a simple story and complicates it almost beyond recognition” (Frank). Frank, like Willard before, stumbles through his review of the novel, succumbing to the temporal confusion in the novel by incorrectly reporting which story line of the novel occurs in the present. But with the same breath Frank notes that “[w]ithout a doubt, Davis writes beautifully” (Frank). This theme continues in reviews of *The Thin Place*, perhaps Davis’ most popular novel. Lucy Ellman, writing for the *New York Times*, hesitantly compliments Davis, saying that the novel “is [a] rare, brave and original thing” (Ellman). But after this praise, Ellman switches to joking criticism, commenting reading the novel feels “like being holed up with some crazy old nun” (Ellman). Ellman continues these attempts at humor by wondering if Davis “just smoked her first joint” before writing the book (Ellman). Ellman’s review, plagued with jokes and vague impressions, hardly functions as a review of the novel at all. Ellman finds herself befuddled by the novel, unsure whether to praise Davis or laugh at her, resulting in another poor review that does not effectively analyze Davis’ writing or themes.

With such mixed and limited reviews, Davis understandably stands outside the literary canon as her writing does not neatly fall into a particular literary tradition. Critics and readers struggle to define her writing style and, unable to place her in a delineated box, dismiss her altogether. This thesis differs from this trend that has defined responses to her works by exploring Davis’ novels as original and enlightening opinions on the changes that mark the contemporary era, an era that defies categorization itself. Davis incorporates postmodern and feminist themes in her writing, providing two lenses which will be used to analyze her novels, specifically domestic spaces and the women within them. This thesis will examine how Davis critiques traditional domestic models and imagines a new home space for women to live within.

### The Domestic: Origins, Postmodernism and Feminism

The association of women and the home, resulting in the creation of traditional domestic spaces as they stand today, began in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of a middle class in European society. “The elaboration of the private as a domestic haven of feminine grace and charm” functioned as a way to separate middle class women, who were privileged enough to not work in the home, from working class women, who were saddled with the responsibility of maintaining their own domestic spaces (Blunt and Rose 3). Thus patriarchal gender expectations relegated middle and upper class women to the privacy of their homes as a male status symbol, while the economic, social and political realms outside became “the arena of aggressive masculine competition” (Blunt and Rose 3). This distinction between the private and the public, between female spaces and male spaces, allowed “the bourgeoisie to distinguish themselves from other social groups,” namely the working class that required both men and women to work in public and private spheres to survive (Blunt and Rose 3). Domestic spaces of the privileged middle class thus became intimately tied to “feminine grace,” increasingly isolating women from the outside world because of their association with this “private,” untouchable sphere. Ultimately, “[w]omen’s lives” became “solely defined by their responsibilities as wives and mothers” inside their homes (Gillis and Hollows 4). The concept of the traditional domestic developed from this creation of gendered spaces, with women’s identity inextricably connected to their work in the home and for their family.

Over time, this concept of divided space, the private versus the public, has received a wide range of praise and condemnation with the home described as everything from an isolating prison to a peaceful haven for women. Up to the 1960s, most people viewed the home as “the ‘proper’ place for women” because women needed to be protected from the demands, the

aggression and the chaos of the public, masculine world (Gillis and Hollows 4). But with the emergence of second wave feminism in the 1960s and '70s, feminists began to contest the supposed benefits of keeping women confined. For these women, "the home was frequently portrayed as a prison or constraint" (Gillis and Hollows 1). Forcing women into a life defined by the concerns of home and family severely limited women's ability to develop a sense of self as the small space of the "home rendered them isolated, powerless and, crucially, lacking a sense of identity derived from their own labour" (Gillis and Hollows 6). Second wave feminists thus fought a long battle to liberate the housewife, freeing her from menial domestic tasks and allowing her to find "a sense of identity" in the public realm. The second wave feminist movement, to a certain extent, achieved this goal as more women today are able to enter the workforce without severe repercussions. But the concept of "domestic space" and women's role within it continues to be a fiercely debated topic today due to a strong conservative backlash against shifting social norms in American culture. Thus the idea of "domestic space" can no longer be simply defined as the place where a person lives. The home now carries with it the positive connotations of traditional society and the negative interpretations of second wave feminism, resulting in a disputed space that finds relevance in a contemporary era.

In a time of rapid change inspired by the convoluted concept of the postmodern, the definitions of any space are reevaluated and recreated, challenging traditional modes of understanding. Postmodernism, an increasingly complicated term that stretches across a wide range of fields, can be characterized in the literary field by its rejection of "rigid genre distinctions" as well as its emphasis on "pastiche, parody,...irony, and playfulness" in writing (Klages). Similarly, postmodern theory often "favors reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity (especially in narrative structures), ambiguity, simultaneity, and



an emphasis on the destructured, decentered, dehumanized subject” (Klages). Thus, with all of these contradictory and chaotic techniques in play at once, postmodernist theory involves chaos, inversion and confusion, all of which upset previously held certainties about the continuity of reality. Postmodern theories of space follow these techniques and trends. Fredric Jameson, one of the leading theorists of postmodernism, defines postmodern space as “hyperspace,” with “the strange new feeling of an absence of inside and outside, the bewilderment and loss of spatial orientation” and “the messiness of an environment in which things and people no longer find their “place”” (Jameson 118). This complicated explanation emphasizes the chaotic, limitless potentials of postmodern spaces, with the blending of inside and outside, the inversion of flat and deep, and the separation of the surface from the object. Postmodern theories of space have paved the way for innovative reinventions of traditional domestic spaces, resulting in new ways of describing how women can relate to and experience the home.

In this thesis, I will apply two theories of space articulated by Gaston Bachelard, a phenomenologist, and Fredric Jameson, a postmodernist, to the novels of Davis. In *The Poetics of Space*, a precursor to the late of postmodern theories of space, Bachelard imaginatively personifies the home in order to explore the creative possibilities of domestic space. Bachelard argues that, because of its ability to protect people from an unpredictable outside world, the house takes on “a living value” (Bachelard 59). The home’s human like qualities bring “an element of unreality” and imagination into domestic spaces, expanding the home far beyond four physical walls (Bachelard 59). Thus domestic space, or “[i]nhabited space” to Bachelard, “transcends geometrical space,” meaning the home holds more imaginative, expansive potential than other spaces (Bachelard 47). While Bachelard takes a fancifully imagined approach to the home, Jameson attempts to classify the chaos of postmodern space in architecture. The

postmodern home he examines involves “an effacement of the categories of inside/outside, or a rearrangement of them,” creating a new kind of space (Jameson 112). This new space, Jameson’s hyperspace, “has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself...and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (Jameson 44). For Jameson, the inversions of postmodern hyperspace create new possibilities for not only space, but also definitions of the individual. Postmodern space theories thus create a myriad of options for domestic spaces beyond the traditional binary of public versus private, allowing this hierarchy to merge or invert, redefining the home as more than an isolated private sphere. These concepts of postmodernism have proliferated throughout contemporary society and theory, in part influencing the feminist theorists who also examine current trends in space and their impact on the individual.

Postmodernism can be traced through many contemporary feminist theories, especially in the gendered critiques of postmodern space theory by Kathleen Kirby. In *Indifferent Boundaries*, Kirby devotes part of her discussion of postmodern space to the application of a gendered lens to Jameson. Throughout Jameson’s theory, he assumes that all individuals will experience postmodern space in the same way; all individuals move through space similarly. Jameson argues that postmodern space has made individuals more aware of the space around them, a point that Kirby critiques by insisting that women, especially minority women, intimately experience their place in space all the time. Since the development of the home as a woman’s space requiring her constant maintenance, women have always been intimately aware of their surroundings. “Women...are often responsible for the maintenance of the household’s physical environment,” meaning that women, not men, are on duty within domestic spaces all the time (Kirby 63-64). This constant “consciousness” of physical spaces constitutes “a perpetually

wearying aspect of femininity” (Kirby 62). Thus postmodern space, as articulated by Jameson, is limited in its applications to women within domestic spaces. Women do not experience space, especially the home, in the same way as men do, necessitating a feminist analysis of the gendering of the domestic.

Central ideas of postmodernism, such as expanding chaos and inversion, can be found in many contemporary feminist theories of space, theories that retain postmodern themes but focus a gendered lens on these spaces. Iris Marion Young argues, like Bachelard, that the home and the women that maintain it protect humanity’s values. But unlike Bachelard, Young focuses solely on women’s relationship to this domestic space. She theorizes that a middle ground, one that breaks down the binaries between public and private and between the confining traditional homes that isolate women and the complete rejection of the domestic by second wave feminists, can exist. Young concludes that, “[d]espite the real dangers of romanticizing the home ... there are also dangers in turning our backs on the home” (Young 154). Thus the domestic does not need to be completely embraced or abandoned, but instead renegotiated by contemporary women, a task that Davis undertakes in her writing. Theorists Gillian Blunt and Alison Rose emphasize this point further by arguing that contemporary postmodern space allows for “more fragmented, complex and often contradictory notions of both space and subjectivity [to] emerge” (Blunt and Rose 19). The proliferation of postmodern theory allowed for the possibility of shifting, even “contradictory” subjectivity. These ideas have been taken up by feminist theorists seeking new ways to articulate how women can live in a postmodern world, especially in the home. Davis builds on these opportunities for redefinition and renegotiation, both of space and subjectivity, to explore how domestic spaces and women relate in contemporary society. This thesis will examine Davis’ project of creating a home inspired by these theories.

### Davis and Revisions of the Home and the Housewife

This thesis will apply the previously discussed concepts of domestic space and both postmodern and feminist theories to three novels by Davis: *Hell* (1998), *The Walking Tour* (1999), and *The Thin Place* (2006). The exploration of these novels will move chronologically, evaluating each novel in turn in order to examine Davis' ongoing negotiation with the domestic throughout her career. Tracing the novels in this manner reveals the development of Davis' argument regarding home spaces and the women within them. Over time, Davis moves from completely destroying the prison-like homes to attempting to work with the domestic spaces that already exist, conceptualizing a newly created, contemporary concept of the home and the homemaker.

In the three novels that will be examined in this thesis, Davis reformulates stereotypical images of the home and the housewife, disrupting both the images of the traditional woman working selflessly in the home and also the modern woman who has left the home completely behind. In *Hell*, Davis intimately explores the home spaces of three different families in three different times, providing ample evidence of the horrors inherent in the traditional mode of divided spheres. These women function as housewives in the traditional sense, hopelessly devoted to the domestic spaces that confine them. For Davis, the problems of these homes can only be corrected through complete destruction. Realizing that this ignores some of the redemptive qualities of the home, Davis moves to attempting to create a new, liberating, limitless domestic space in *The Walking Tour*. Through the imagination of the central character, Susan, the old and physically constraining home is replaced with a fanciful, woman-created space of the subconscious mind illuminated by art. Though this allows some reconciliation of the home, it does not create a physical, tangible option for women to live in the home. Thus, in *The Thin*

*Place*, Davis creates her most realistic home space for contemporary women navigating the contradictions and confusions inherent in the role of a housewife. Building a community that incorporates spirituality and the natural world, Davis develops a new idea of home that thrives on the melding of inside and outside, of chaos and inversion. By the end of these three novels, Davis has clearly evolved her own ideas of domestic space and women to adapt to contemporary issues, ultimately creating a malleable, democratic and liberating home.

### *Hell*

*Hell*, Davis' most experimental novel, chronicles the lives of women within their homes in three different places and times: the 19<sup>th</sup> century life of professional homemaker Edwina Moss, an old dollhouse with mismatched dolls, and the disintegrating home of a 1950s American family. Davis moves through these three storylines in order to grapple with the traditional place of women in the home and how women navigate patriarchal ideas of the domestic. Through the novel, the hopeless and extremely limited lives the women lead emerge, revealing their homes to be confining prisons rather than beautiful monuments. With the reality of the domestic dramatically exposed, the boundaries of the home that defend the space from intrusion and that keep the women locked inside begin to break down. Death invades the defenseless spaces, destroying the homes and liberating the women from physical confinement, irreversibly eliminating traditional domestic spaces.

The homes begin as ideal, beautiful, wealthy domestic spaces that function as traditional, private spheres. In the storyline of the 1950s American family, all of the homes in the neighborhood have an "the ivy-laced brick façade with its copper-roofed bow window, the white front door with its fanlight and brass knocker, the crimson azaleas bordering the stoop" (Davis, *Hell*, 4). These expensive, intricate details establish the home as an upper-middle class space of

old-fashioned elegance. The dollhouse, which sits inside the larger home of the 1950s family, “is made of wood painted white, its façade swinging out like a door to reveal the rooms of the two lower stories, its red gabled roof hinged at the peak” (Davis, *Hell*, 38). The dollhouse has a similar traditional sophistication to the larger house. Both homes are described by their “façade[s],” a word significant in its repetition for the double meaning it carries, indicating both the front of a house and a superficial appearance or illusion. The homes have beautiful exteriors, though this appearance could easily be a disguise meant to cover up a dark reality inside. And in a different time, but in a similar style, the cottage of Edwina Moss has “elegant appointments,” with “pleasing proportions” and “windows giving onto a garden where rain is beading on roses” (Davis, *Hell*, 72). All three of the homes, with their subtle details indicating affluency, stand as representations of the ideal home conceived of in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century model. In this traditional mode of dividing space, “the private sphere was the site of home, family life and consumption, and the public sphere was identified with work, industry...and production” (Gillis and Hollows 4). The homes in *Hell* all function as private, delineated, protected spaces which intern the families, especially the women, within their walls. These domestic spaces appear from the outside to be perfect, but from the beginning Davis insinuates that the ideal images of these homes are in fact an illusion.

Though all three home spaces appear to be manifestations of the perfect private sphere, suggestions that their faultless exteriors hide horrors within undermine their unblemished façades. The book begins with the warning that “[s]omething is wrong in the house” (Davis, *Hell*, 1). This vague statement repeats frequently with slight variations throughout the start of the book. The warnings become increasingly darker, shifting to “[t]here’s always something wrong in the house” (Davis, *Hell*, 4). Through ominous statements like these, the unknown narrator

implies that despite beautiful exteriors, the homes all have “something wrong” inside. The model of patriarchal and divided spaces, which for years separated the home and the women within from the rest of the world, is implicated by the narrator as inherently flawed. The narrator addresses this directly, saying, “Something wrong here? Of course it’s natural to feel apprehension anytime the picture seems flooded with light” (Davis, *Hell*, 6). The portrayal of the homes as idealized mansions creates a picture too perfect to be real, creating a sense of “apprehension” in both the characters and the reader. The homes in *Hell* appear perfect, but the idyllic image, so “flooded with light,” only serves to create unease, the feeling that the homes are all flawed in some way. The narrator suggests that the original home spaces which conform to the traditional constructions of the private sphere are imperfect, perhaps terrifying spaces.

After the revelation that the pleasing exterior walls of the domestic hide “something wrong” within them, the images of the homes shift from beautiful and traditional to a corrupted reality, defined by inevitable, impending destruction. Through the repetition of the phrase “something wrong,” the narrator voices a concern that the homes have broken and cannot fulfill their full potential. And, as the daughter of the 1950s family, who sometimes serves as the narrator, notes, “[o]nce something breaks it’s impossible to restore it to its original condition,” meaning that the domestic spaces of the novel have all been irrecoverably corrupted (Davis, *Hell*, 21). She mentions this in context of her home, adding that “this observation would also seem to hold true for any kind of movement of furniture within a house for instance, the nightstand’s gradual fall from favor, from girlish sunny bedroom into dark abyss” (Davis, *Hell*, 21). The daughter’s old fashioned home shows signs of this corruption with certain rooms “fall[ing] from favor” or falling into a “dark abyss.” Her house no longer functions as a comfortable and untouchable private sphere and can never be brought back “to its original condition” of

traditional perfection. Another narrator, perhaps the same one, furthers the concept of broken domestic spaces. “Of course every house in the world, no matter how well-built, will eventually catch fire, blow up, wash away, get knocked down to make way for something new. No matter how durable a house, it isn’t immortal” (Davis, *Hell*, 24). No home, “no matter how well-built,” will stand forever because something within has broken and rooms have started to slide into a “dark abyss,” foreshadowing the doom coming to all homes. Thus the narrator reveals that the traditional model of divided spaces, with women contained within the private sphere, no longer functions effectively in a contemporary context. By relying on the labor and confinement of women, traditional gendered spaces have split open, revealing an inherently oppressive system.

Women, as the selfless and trapped maintainers of the home, stand at the center of the ideal patriarchal domestic space. After noting that “[s]omething is wrong in the house,” the narrator lists all the traditional expectations of women in the home, duties that should, in theory, maintain the domestic (Davis, *Hell*, 1). Referring to the uneasy feeling pervading the home spaces of the novel, the narrator addresses the women living within them, saying “[o]f course you’re dismayed. You have every right to be, for haven’t you followed the rules to the letter, ridding your rooms of all corruption, the mite-infested cheese, the flyblown mutton, the sour bed linens, the dung-caked boots?” (Davis, *Hell*, 1). Traditional gender roles, developed with the division of spaces and perpetuated to today, outline women’s responsibilities as solely within the home, making them responsible for “ridding [the] rooms of all corruption.” Gender norms thus “associate women, the home and domesticity,” serving to “reinforce the assumption that housework and childcare are women’s work” alone (Shaw and Lee 429). Within this patriarchal model, men expect women to keep the home, maintaining its perfect image on the outside and also its functions inside as a comforting and private space. Over time, the ideology of the



housewife has become so engrained that “[t]he work women do in the home is often not considered work at all: It is something women do for love, or because they are women” (Shaw and Lee 429). All three women in *Hell*, the mother of the 1950s family, the dollhouse mother, and Edwina, begin the novel attempting to “[follow] the rules to the letter” by fulfilling their duties as housewives. Patriarchal gender norms divided along the lines of public and private space define the lives of the women, limiting them to their work done in the home. But when the private sphere starts to disintegrate and “something wrong” emerges in each house, the suffocating reality of the lives of housewives surfaces.

These gender norms confine women to the home, expecting them to live solely for the maintenance of the home and family, and severely limit the agency of women. Following the path of many feminist theorists that critique the gendered division of labor, Young extensively looks at the ways in which societies “equate women with home,...sometimes preventing them from leaving the house. If house and home mean the confinement of women for the sake of nourishing male projects, then feminists have good reason to reject home as a value” (Young 123). In the traditional domestic model, societal norms dictate that women become housewives, giving up their dreams and identity in order to support their husbands. Young’s analysis of domestic expectations follows the writings of feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Simone de Beauvoir who suggest “that the comforts and supports of house and home historically come at women’s expense. Women serve, nurture, and maintain so that the bodies and souls of men and children gain confidence and expansive subjectivities” (Young 123). A woman’s role of housewife removes any opportunity for her to define herself, allowing her husband the chance instead. In *Hell*, the dollhouse mother functions as the literal representation of the trapped woman with no agency inside her domestic space, serving as a metaphor for all housewives

confined to the home. “‘Lucky for me I don’t have a heart, she says, bending the wire stem of her neck, bringing her head closer to the father’s. Only wires and fluff, she adds” (Davis, *Hell*, 35).

The dollhouse mother represents in the extreme the lack of agency women experience within patriarchal models of domestic space that dictate a woman’s identity. She, and all housewives, are “[o]nly wires and fluff” within their domestic spaces, completely devoid of the power to define themselves or make their own choices.

The source of women’s lack of subjectivity within the home, Young argues, can be found in Martin Heidegger’s theories of dwelling and building. Heidegger states that “[t]hrough building, man establishes a world and his place in the world” (Young 126). Heidegger frames all of his discussions of establishing a “place in the world” around men and “male projects.” He completely leaves women out of his theoretical framework. Young and other feminist critics refer to his theory of building when critiquing the patriarchal norms that trap women within the domestic but deny women the opportunity to build a space of their own. Though women cannot build in his theory, men require women to inhabit and maintain male places, resulting in a gendered division of labor that allows men the agency to create themselves and their own space, while women only preserve these places. And, according to Young, “[i]f building in this way is basic to the emergence of subjectivity, to dwelling in the world with identity and history, then it would appear that only men are subjects. On the whole, women do not build” (Young 126).

Women lack subjectivity because, in Heidegger’s theory, women cannot create home spaces of their own. Instead, they dwell in the spaces of men, losing themselves to serve “male projects.” Davis’ unknown narrator comments on this, again addressing the women of the novel, after noting what “scripture” says about where men should build their homes. “Of course you’ll have nothing to say on this score, scripture failing to address the subject of where the wise woman

builds her house” (Davis, *Hell*, 33). Similar to Young’s reading of Heidegger, the narrator of *Hell* addresses women’s absence from building narratives. The patriarchal system denies women both the opportunity to build and the option of creating their own subjectivity.

Thus the women in *Hell*, unable to build their own places and trapped within patriarchal domestic structures, experience their homes as prisons. Men ultimately create these prison-like homes as they lock women within them in order to support their own identities. In Heidegger’s idea of home, according to Irigaray, “man projects onto woman the nostalgic longing for the lost wholeness of the original mother. To fix and keep hold of his identity, man makes a house, puts things in it, and confines there his wife, who reflects his identity to him” (Young 124). Men build their own ideal private spheres, creating their identity by confining their material positions and their wives within that space. Wives, placed in the home and transformed into housewives, find themselves trapped, unable to escape its confines in order to pursue their own projects. For feminist critics, women therefore always experience the home as “a prison or constraint” (Gillis 1). The houses of *Hell* are no exception. The narrator comments that the home, working as a prison, “will turn around and show you who’s boss. You can’t make friends with it. That must be why housewives need to invent endless projects, to trick themselves into thinking they aren’t lonely” (Davis, *Hell*, 84). Domestic spaces, though beautiful from the outside, exist as prisons instead of castles, dominating the women within them. The narrator therefore reveals the inherent flaw in all of the homes: they function as cages that exploit and trap the women inside.

Confined to the home without the possibility of agency or escape, the women of *Hell* give up, abandoning their traditional domestic duties in the face of inevitable failure. The women wonder, “what’s the use, really, if you can no longer tell the difference? What’s the use if you can no longer tell where your face leaves off and the gray sky begins?” (Davis, *Hell*, 1). The

women question the purpose of maintaining homes that trap them, asking “what’s the use.”

Ultimately, they come to the conclusion that their work as housewives causes more harm than good for themselves. Within domestic constraints, the women’s “faces” blend with “the gray sky,” leaving them without a self and without a future. The women realize that they cannot find agency or subjectivity within old home spaces and within the confines of traditional gender norms. Responding to the inevitable futility of housework, the mother of the 1950s family slowly begins to ignore her domestic responsibilities, defying patriarchal expectations by failing to take care of the house. In response, her husband thinks, “[c]rud everywhere, and whatever became of the girl he married, whose zeal for housework once approached the fanatic level” (Davis, *Hell*, 74). The mother of the 1950s family simply stops maintaining the home, allowing “crud” to pile up everywhere, asserting herself through inaction. Devoid of subjectivity because she cannot build her own spaces, and unable to escape the prison of her husband’s house, the mother exercises her severely limited agency by ceasing all housework. The other women of *Hell* follow her lead, attempting to rebel against society’s expectations that women must be housewives by refusing to maintain the traditional domestic space.

With the growing sense that traditional models of domestic spaces that imprison women will fail, the individual story lines and the homes they describe begin to collapse into each other. Edwina, starting to fall into madness, describes this process in one of her long and complicated monologues. She comments on her current state and the state of all women in the home:

“preferring to say that you are uneasy, that you are experiencing dis-ease, which is to say, in *this* house, *now*” (Davis, *Hell*, 71). All the women of *Hell* feel the suffocating presence of impending doom, knowing they are trapped in an inherently flawed model. Similarly, the structure of the novel which respects the delineation of private spheres by describing each home individually

starts to collapse, mirroring the downfall of the homes in the novel. The cause of women's "disease" within the home emerges because their homes, and the stories of each home, do not line up perfectly with one another and therefore fail to continue the tradition of idealized domestic space. Thus, Edwina notes "that when you superimpose houses one on another, dollhouse on semidetached, semidetached on cottage, gaps and cracks appear, places where the walls and doors and windowpanes and closets fail to line up" (Davis, *Hell*, 71). As the "gaps and cracks appear," the stories start to collapse, invading each other's narratives and ruining the integrity of the delineated home spaces. With the homes no longer standing as impenetrable, private units, invading forces begin to enter, hastening the destruction of the traditional domestic model.

Returning to early warnings that appear in the novel that ghosts of the dead haunt the homes of the living, the inevitability of death intrudes on the domestic spaces. In the world of Edwina, death enters her home through her daughter, Gertie, who falls ill and refuses to eat. Gertie denies Edwina's efforts to save her, getting closer to death and in the process bringing death into the home. Edwina wonders, "[h]ow can the world's skin be so infinitely permeable when Gertie's is not? It is because to be alive is to resist assault?" (Davis, *Hell*, 134). Surviving with the women within as caretakers, the homes "live" in a sense and therefore "resist assault." But when the women give up their domestic duties, realizing that the domestic mode in which they live is fallible and doomed, the homes begin to "die" without care, much like Gertie. The homes no longer "resist assault," succumbing to slow decay with the entrance of death. Edwina goes on to describe this, noting that "only when you are dead can you be planted, even the most durable parts of you finally giving way, worms in, worms out, everything channeled through those mindless digestive systems until you are dirt" (Davis, *Hell*, 134). The home, while maintained and "alive" resists attack. But without women to nourish the home, it becomes

vulnerable to destruction, “the most durable parts...finally giving way.” Thus, the home of *Hell*, unmaintained and exposed to dangerous outside forces, face imminent ruin.

The possibility of annihilation becomes a reality for the homes of the novel as the early predictions that all homes will eventually fall comes to fruition, illuminating the weakness of the patriarchal model of the domestic. For the 1950s family, a hurricane causes the death of the daughter’s friend, destroys their neighborhood and causes the “death” of the family home. “Like the angel of death the hurricane’s eye passed over us. The willow fell. Glass broke. The storm got louder, came inside” (Davis, *Hell*, 118). The “angel of death,” embodied in the hurricane, literally enters their home, violating all its defenses when it “came inside.” The intrusion continues inside the dollhouse with a large mouse functioning as the invading force. Entering and upsetting all of the furniture in the small house, the mouse tells the dollhouse mother, “[e]verything is as it’s always been, little mother, which is to say, terrible” (Davis, *Hell*, 160). The model of gendered and divided spaces has always been “terrible” in its oppression of women. With the women rebelling through inaction, the “terrible” system begins to collapse. The mouse foreshadows this doom, saying, “[d]ancing fire, dancing, dancing! Yes!” (Davis, *Hell*, 160). With the hurricane and the mouse intruding into the private home spaces, bringing death with them, the traditional domestic spaces face their inevitable death in a “[d]ancing fire.”

The homes of *Hell* face total devastation, and therefore realize Davis’ original solution to the problem of old domestic spaces functioning as oppressive prisons for women. The long final chapter of the novel chronicles both Edwina and her home’s descent into chaos and ultimate obliteration. While walking, Edwina wonders, “even the sky (the ceiling?) is growing lighter, more translucent, and even though I can begin to see tall vague shapes (trees? pillars?...) I have no sense of where I am, only that terrible sense of either impending or unrealized loss” (Davis,

*Hell*, 174). Edwina loses her sense of place, unable to determine if she is outside or inside, where her home ends and the outside world begins. The home space no longer stands separate from the outside world and no longer functions as an effective private sphere. All boundaries, including the division of private and public, cease to exist. Thus, the traditional model of a protected and separated domestic space burns in the final words of the book: “thousands of bright sparks set loose with each burst of rifle fire, smoldering and then catching in the underbrush, your house is on fire, YOUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE!” (Davis, *Hell*, 179). The novel ends with this scene of utter destruction, Davis leaving no space for redemption and no chance for the homes to rebuild. At the conclusion of the book, destruction remains the only way to end the prison-like construction of the home and free the women within.

As the domestic implodes, the women of *Hell* find liberation outside traditional notions of subjectivity, mirroring feminist and postmodern constructions of identity discussed by Kirby. Kirby argues that in a postmodern world the traditional idea of the “individual” no longer works. “Contemporary theorists seek to break down the inadvertent rigid boundaries associated with the Enlightenment individual, the autonomous ego” (Kirby 36). The idea of the “Enlightenment individual,” or traditional model, as self-sufficient and separate ceases to perform in a world where boundaries have dissolved, much like the disintegration of the homes of *Hell*. According to Kirby, “once we discard the Enlightenment notion of the individual as disembodied, evanescent, transcendent ‘mind,’ it is impossible to imagine the subject except in some yet-to-be-specified relation to real space” (Kirby 18). In the contemporary moment in which both Kirby and Davis write, traditional definitions of subjectivity and individuality have disintegrated and new ideas of defining the self have “yet-to-be-specified.” In *Hell*, the women exist in this liminality between the traditional and the new models, when their private spheres cease to exist.

Liberated from the confines of the domestic boundaries, the women enter into “some yet-to-be-specified relation to real space.” Davis attempts to define this feminist and postmodern subjectivity entered into by her female characters through the movements of their ghosts after their deaths.

With the destruction of all home spaces in a fiery chaos, the women of *Hell* escape their domestic prisons, finally finding some agency through death. When dreaming of escape earlier in the novel, the daughter of the 1950s family believes it would be “[b]etter far the wild and disembodied soul navigating the trackless waste! The ghost hand scrabbling at the windowpane. Better far to be a ghost outside a house looking in” than to be trapped within the house (Davis, *Hell*, 8). For the daughter and the rest of the women the idea of leaving behind the body for the unknown afterlife of ghosts, is “better far” than living within the harsh constraints of the home. Thus with extremely limited agency, the women’s only chance at freedom comes in the form of death. So the women die with their homes, leaving physical limits behind them. The dollhouse mother finds death with a “[f]lick of an eyelid, twinkling of an eye and – poof! – a girlfriend gone. Each castle in the air, its construction lavish, painstaking, and – poof! poof! poof! poof! – an entire family” (Davis, *Hell*, 158). Death comes swiftly and inevitably to the dollhouse mother; she is gone with a simple “poof!” as the dollhouse also collapses. And, near the end of Edwina’s story, on the verge of her complete decent into madness, Edwina wonders at Gertie’s choice to forsake life for the freedom of death. “How fatiguing can seem one’s obligation to appetite; how preferable Gertie’s solution! Nor does Gertie lack for companionship, since when you dine on air, you dine with the dead” (Davis, *Hell*, 143). The bodies of the women of *Hell*, all tied to the confines of the domestic, burn with the houses. But the women’s spirits, their “wild



and disembodied soul[s]” exist afterwards, representing new concepts of subjectivity without boundaries or limits.

The emergence of a boundless mode of existence in place of the “Enlightenment individual” becomes most pronounced in the final, seventeen-page sentence told by Edwina Moss as she loses her mind and herself for an unknown, “yet-to-be-specified” subjectivity. Following her complicated and random stream of consciousness, the final pages of the novel track Edwina’s loss of home and descent into madness. As Edwina attempts to navigate her disintegrating home, “she finds it impossible to move...(though perhaps the paralysis is merely an illusion, for surely the ability to discern motion rests in the body’s sense of itself as discrete from its surroundings, and she’s by now lost all such powers of discernment” (Davis, *Hell*, 171). Edwina cannot differentiate herself, her body or her mind, from her surroundings. Engulfed in the destruction of both her home and any concept of boundaries, Edwina loses any sense of selfhood. She realizes with horror that it is not “possible any longer to feign innocence, to believe...that to create a world is to assume control over what will live and die in it, as if I’ve only just now discovered that it is not such power of choice which lies within my grasp, but the skeletal limbs of the gibbering dead” (Davis, *Hell*, 177). Edwina realizes that the domestic sphere she thought was under her control never existed. As a woman in the patriarchal space model, she cannot “create a world” in which she controls anything. Ordered to serve a home that imprisons her, Edwina never had the “power of choice,” the freedom of agency or subjectivity, in her life. Watching the destruction of her home, Edwina realizes that she only holds “the skeletal limbs of the gibbering dead” in her hands. Her only possibility for escape, just like all the trapped housewives of *Hell*, is death.

Throughout *Hell*, Davis explores traditional constructions of domestic spaces which dictate the confinement of housewives to serve homes created by men, coming to the conclusion that only death and destruction can end the vicious cycle trapping women. Through three storylines, Davis illuminates the undeniable flaw that defines the private sphere: the subjugation and abuse of women. With the exposure of this horrifying reality and the small acts of rebellion enacted by the women, the homes succumb to their unavoidable end. The women die with their homes, leaving behind the physical limits of their bodies. The women's ghosts as subjects defy definition and containment. This limitless, boundless subjectivity reemerges in *The Walking Tour*, Davis' next novel that confronts the issues of the domestic.

### ***The Walking Tour***

*The Walking Tour* follows *Hell* chronologically and thematically as Davis continues to navigate the repression of women by the traditional model of domestic spaces. Moving beyond the obliteration of home spaces at the end of *Hell*, Davis begins to develop an answer to how women can inhabit the domestic with agency in *The Walking Tour*. Susan, the protagonist, lives in a large mansion on acres of property, but something is still "wrong in the house." The once-idyllic mansion that Susan grew up in now stands in near ruin, existing in a post-apocalyptic world where the ideas of private property and ownership have disappeared. In this world boundaries cease to mean anything, resulting in the slow destruction of the home as outside forces work their way inside. Meanwhile, Susan attempts to fight the loss of her home and the world she grew up in by piecing together the mystery of her mother's death on a walking tour in Wales years before. Susan's journey to determine the reason for her mother's death and how it is connected to the shift in human consciousness that destroyed the idea of private property leads her away from old social norms, including the role of women as housewife. In place of physical

restraints, Susan discovers a domestic space of the imagination, creating limitless possibilities for creating a home that allows for a boundless subjectivity for the women within it.

The decaying house that Susan inhabits exists in its former palatial glory in Susan's memories of a now-gone traditional domestic ideal. As an adult, Susan remains in the house she grew up in, but in an age with no respect for private property, all that remains of the old home are Susan's memories of the former luxury. Susan remembers having "dinner prepared by Mrs. Koop... and served by some cute-faced and inept maid – deluxe treatment even then" (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 4). During her childhood, Susan lived a privileged domestic dream, full of maids and servants to take care of her family. To further the luxurious image, the dining room of Susan's memory contained "[a] long honey-colored table polished with beeswax and lit with beeswax candles, at each place one of the ever so subtly unmatched Blue Willow plates" (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 4). The "ever so subtl[e]" affluence of her childhood house mirrors the traditional constructions of the ideal home. In the original articulations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century private sphere, the image of the perfect home was "a domestic haven of feminine grace and charm...that enabled the bourgeoisie to distinguish themselves from other social groups" (Blunt and Rose 3). Susan's wealthy parents, with all the intricate and expensive details in their mansion, created the epitome of old fashioned domestic dreams, distinguishing themselves as upper class.

This idealized "domestic haven" that Susan grew up in provides, in addition to social status, the stability and safety that Adrienne Rich emphasizes in her feminist analysis of "home" as a place. For Rich, "[t]he home separates out "the private" and "the public" and forms a container for the idealized family" (Kirby 27). The house in *The Walking Tour* functions as a private fortress, a definitive and stable "place" that defends and contains the perfect family unit. Susan's father, Bobby, holds a similar conception of home when he repeatedly tells Susan that

“[a] man’s home is his castle” (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 74). Bobby, the stereotypical husband and father, takes pride in his wealth and “the exciting by-products, specifically his family, his business, and his real estate, including a hundred acres of prime farmland and forest” (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 31). Bobby defines himself by acquiring property and creating his home, his “castle,” that contains his social status and wealth in a delineated and protected space.

According to Rich, Bobby’s space “assume[s] set boundaries that [he] fills to achieve a solid identity” (Kirby 19). Thus, the mansion of Susan’s memories holds and protects Bobby’s identity as a stereotypical upper class and masculine father and husband. This subjectivity rests upon the status that his family, his money and most importantly his home affords him.

Susan critiques her own memory of this idealized space, alternating between the beauty of the old home and the harsh reality of her mother’s lack of agency in Bobby’s dream space. Luce Irigaray, in a feminist critique of the home, insists that “[t]he patriarchal gender system allows man a subjectivity that depends on woman’s objectification and dereliction; he has a home at the expense of her homelessness” (Young 128). Bobby’s subjectivity rests upon his castle and its contents, including Carole, his wife, and Susan. In that mansion, Carole becomes an object, just another piece of Bobby’s image. Thus Carole, confined to the home as one component of Bobby’s selfhood, is left “isolated, powerless and, crucially, lacking a sense of identity derived from [her] own labour” (Gillis and Hollows 6). In a small attempt to defy this constriction, Carole insists on leaving things in disrepair around the house. Susan “think[s] the bare bulbs and cracked windowpanes and rotting sills made her think her escape routes were still open, that she was still free to come and go as she pleased” (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 213). Carole undermines the defenses of the home, leaving the house unfinished and vulnerable as a way to assert herself in Bobby’s space. But rather than stating this as fact, Susan notes that

Carole only thought this act gave her an escape. In reality, Carole, like all of the housewives in *Hell*, remains “powerless” and “isolated” as a woman in patriarchal domestic space.

In addition to alternating between harsh critiques and fond recollections, Susan also moves between these memories and the realities of her decaying home, inhabiting a liminal space between two worlds and two identities. The comfort and stability of the home of her childhood, her father’s “castle,” has now become a contested and shifting space in Susan’s post-apocalyptic reality. Rich comments on this, noting that “[i]f place is organic and stable, space is malleable, a fabric of continually shifting sites and boundaries” (Kirby 19). Susan moves between the security of place and the instability of space, between the memories of youth and the harsh realities of adulthood. Though Susan as an adult lives in a completely different reality, her parent’s “world’s the one [she] was born into” (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 93). The original domestic ideals instilled in Susan since birth used money as “the measure of success: if you followed the rules, you’d be rich and happy and gorgeous and live forever in a nice house like this one used to be” (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 93). The world of Susan’s parents, of the perfect home, defined male success by acquiring property and status symbols, like Bobby’s idyllic mansion. But in Susan’s current world, where property and ownership have ceased to hold meaning, the stable “place” of Susan’s memories becomes chaotic and meaningless. The home no longer functions as a fortress, becoming a “malleable” space that disrupts the solidified identities offered to men by the dream domestic space.

At the start of the novel, Susan defends the old home, an action that personifies traditional social norms dictating her role as housewife and maintainer of the private sphere. Knowing the home is losing its delineated status, Susan responds by replicating old actions from the days when the mansion worked as the fortress Bobby imagined. Within Susan’s post-

apocalyptic world, a group of homeless wanderers called “Strags” slowly move onto her property. Born out of technological proliferation which obliterated the idea of private property, the Strag population embodies the destruction of boundaries. They have no respect for ownership or borders, moving freely through other people’s property and taking whatever they like. They slowly close in around Susan’s home, giving her a feeling of urgency in repeating old words to indicate her possession of the property: “My house, I thought. Keep out, keep out, keep out. Trespassers Will Be Shot. No boys allowed” (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 57). Though Susan finds comfort in restating these phrases, they mean nothing to the wandering Strags. Susan holds onto her old identity, a selfhood inherited from her father, in which the home acts as her private place. Meanwhile the invasion of the Strags strengthens, breaking down the old home and her old self in the process.

Despite Susan’s feeble attempts to reestablish traditional social norms, the slow decay of the home leaves Susan vulnerable to the chaos of the outside world, requiring Susan to renegotiate her relationship to the domestic. Unable to rely on the home for protection, Susan must now rely upon herself. When she runs into Monkey, a member of the “Strag” subculture, sitting in front of her house, she seeks out “garden shears” that she “plan[s] to use on him if he [gives her] any trouble” (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 55). Though Susan wishes old words of ownership, like “[k]eep out” would work to remove Monkey from her home, the reality of her post-apocalyptic world denies her that comfort. No longer isolated by the private sphere, Susan’s female body is suddenly subject to the dangers of male aggression. In analyzing female movement in postmodern space, Kathleen Kirby states that “because of the ever present threat of physical attack,” most women are “always quite conscious of the position of exits, darkened stairwells, and blind corners” (Kirby 62). With the breakdown of the private sphere, Susan enters

into the traditionally male dominated public realm, becoming at risk of a violent attack for her violation of patriarchal expectations. Feeling vulnerable on her property with Monkey's unwanted presence, Susan immediately searches for a weapon, garden shears in this case, that she can use to defend herself. In the chaos and unpredictability of contemporary space, Susan accepts a new relationship to her world in order to survive.

The slow decay of Susan's idyllic home reaches a climax with the entrance of Monkey, an unpredictable "Strag" that brings with him the unstable postmodern potentials of space and identity. As mentioned above, Monkey first forces Susan to question her safety in the home by acting as an intrusive, possibly dangerous male force. Monkey then appears with increasing frequency, "camping on [Susan's] doorstep" and bringing with him a "combination of youthful health and a misery you can almost smell, possibly due to animal oils in the unwashed hair, the sweat of panic" (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 23). Monkey embodies the opposite of Bobby's domestic ideal; he is unclean, animal-like and full of both "misery" and "panic." He acts randomly, with no respect for ownership, social status, boundaries or hierarchies. His clothes and his actions break down divisions between genders, acting "like gender's the same as property, subject to infinite reversal" (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 73). Monkey personifies "infinite reversal," upsetting traditional social norms, from gender expectations to politeness. Monkey even says he can move through time, claiming that Carole's friend saw him jump from a cliff during the walking tour years before. "Me, Monkey says. The dream boy was me. She dreamed me up and now here I am, at your service" (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 123). Monkey suggests that Ruth "dreamed [him] up," that he is a creation of her imagination, able to defy temporal limits. Monkey, the "dream boy," defies traditional notions of subjectivity by suggesting the possibility of movement through time, space and identity.

Monkey's name, indicating mischief, further symbolizes the chaos and limitless potentials of subjectivity that he brings into Susan's life. His name appears as a metaphor for disorder during the trial regarding Carole's mysterious death. Using Monkey's name, one of the tour goers emphasizes the impossibility of ever really knowing the truth behind what one sees because of the fallibility of perception. "The human mind, Mr. Hsia said, made mischief like a monkey" (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 229). Here, Monkey's name becomes synonymous with mischief making. He represents the chaotic and imaginative potentials of the human mind, making perception of reality and perception of spaces hopelessly unreliable. "How could anyone think...that there was such a thing as perception? The human mind, galloping like horses, swarming like bees, all over the place?" (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 230). Monkey invades Susan's home and mind, making "mischief like a monkey" and challenging what Susan perceives to be normal or possible. Monkey therefore represents both the unreliability and the infinite creative potential of the human mind. Monkey disrupts human perception of truth and reality, revealing the fallibility of the stable male subject created in the patriarchal model of domestic spaces. Susan re-imagines the mansion and her relationship to it, moving away from the world of her parents and toward an undefined and creative subjectivity.

With Monkey's influence and the continuing collapse of her home, Susan starts to conceptualize spaces that defy delineation and definition, moving further and further away from traditional models. With Monkey's lack of concerns for barriers, Susan too ceases to recognize boundaries. While walking across the property, Susan notes that "[i]n fact the only way I knew I was *at* the meadow's edge was because of the boxes – the whole idea of edge having become a thing of the past" (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 94). With Susan's old perception of the home as an impenetrable fortress rendered irrelevant with the influence of Monkey and her post-apocalyptic



environment, the meaning of “edge” no longer functions as a constraint for her. This liberation of space from physical limits resembles Fredric Jameson’s ideas regarding postmodern hyperspace. Susan lives in an extreme example of a postmodern world, full of inversion and increasing chaos, all caused by an implosion of technology years before. Jameson’s hyperspace appears in the wake of the home’s destruction as “an expanding chaos of stimuli unordered by a selective grid of meaning, between whose elements there are no hierarchies, and within which distance and difference are increasingly collapsed” (Kirby 56). Though Jameson focuses mainly on how technology creates this hyperspace in his theories of postmodernism, his ideas of “unordered” space can be found in the novel. In Davis’ post-apocalyptic space, technology proliferates beyond human control and implodes, resulting in the collapse of both technology and hierarchies in Susan’s world. Thus, though technology no longer functions in the novel, the space that results from Monkey’s “mischief” is without order; the mansion has no more importance than the meadow. The “grid of meaning” that Susan’s parents lived by has dissolved. The once beautiful castle Bobby imagined has lost all meaning, collapsing into the chaos of an uncompromising postmodern reality.

In place of the majestic mansion, the bomb shelter that Monkey inhabits emerges as the central domestic space of the novel, embodying of the dark underbelly of the palatial estate by revealing past horrors. The bomb shelter on Susan’s property, in reality, is “a dark cramped cellar filled with the smell of spices and urine and a loud screaming noise, lined on three sides with metal shelving, and the shelves with things he’s stolen from the house” (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 250). Within the traditional model of the private sphere, the space appears to be a corruption of the mansion, an image of the decay of private property into darkness, noise and stolen items. But within the new imaginative potentials of space introduced by Monkey, the

bomb shelter is much more than its physical area, holding within its walls memories of Bobby's infidelity with various mistresses. Susan sees "the ghost of each amorous move still palpable" through "a mysterious shadow rising and lowering above the foldout cot in the corner" (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 250). The cellar holds the dark secrets of the mansion, of Bobby's identity, a characteristic that Gaston Bachelard explores in detail when examining postmodern homes. For Bachelard, the cellar is "the *dark entity* of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces" (Bachelard 18). Bobby's horrible secret of cheating on his wife remains hidden in the "dark entity" of his domestic castle. But now, in a world where temporal and physical boundaries disappear, Susan sees "the ghosts" from Bobby's past wrongdoings, showing that within the bomb shelter, memories take shape and reappear. The bomb shelter "partakes of subterranean forces," becoming a space of subconscious human imagination and creative possibilities to flourish.

The cellar not only contains the deceitful memories of the original home, but also the imaginative potential to create a new domestic space liberated from the patriarchal model. Bachelard notes that "[w]hen we dream [in the cellar], we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths" of the cellar (Bachelard 18). The space of the bomb shelter metaphorically houses humanity's "irrationality," the deeply hidden secrets, memories and impulses of the human mind. Susan's dreams in the bomb shelter, the ghosts of Bobby's infidelity for example, emerge from the irrational, creative part of her mind. Monkey's description of the bomb shelter further reinforces Bachelard's theory. In Monkey's mind, there is "[a] steep flight of stairs leading down down down, at first to an extremely dark passageway lined with moss-covered stones oozing moisture, and finally into a most beautiful country filled with streams and meadows, woods and plains" (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 176). His description takes the reader "down down down"

into Monkey's subconscious dream world. Here the bomb shelter's dark and limited confines spread outward into "a most beautiful country," embodying Monkey's imagination. The bomb shelter is no longer the "dark cramped" space that Susan originally sees, but instead becomes a beautiful and limitless space of imagination.

Thus the bomb shelter becomes the dominant domestic space of the novel as Susan abandons the limits of the old mansion for the infinite possibilities of imagined space. The bomb shelter becomes "[s]pace that has been seized upon by the imagination" which, according to Bachelard, "cannot remain indifferent space" (Bachelard xxxvi). Dreamed up and filled by Monkey, and now Susan, the cellar shifts from a bomb shelter to a meaningful home. Within it, both Monkey and Susan find protection from the chaotic, collapsing outside world, which Bachelard claims is "the chief benefit" of the home. A true domestic space "protects the dreamer," which "allows one to dream in peace" (Bachelard 6). While a storm moves in and Susan's old mansion falls apart, Monkey and Susan find both physical and mental safety in the depths of the cellar. "Someone's banging on the trapdoor, but I'm pretty sure the hatch is secure. Banging and banging, but they'll never get in, no matter how desperate they are" (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 253). Susan and Monkey, in the domestic space of their imaginations, have successfully created a home that protects but also liberates the inhabitants. They have created a new home, a home of the imaginations that still provides essential defensive services.

Monkey's paintings that adorn the walls further magnify the creative possibilities within the bomb shelter. Susan stands in shock when she sees all the paintings Monkey created in a style almost identical to paintings done by her mother. The paintings by Monkey show Carole's "impeccable draftsmanship and her uncanny sense of perspective, her way of making it impossible to tell, for instance, if the mice are unusually big, or the objects in the landscape,

unusually tiny” (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 253). Carole’s artwork, channeled through Monkey, develops spaces that defy physical limitations and invert reality, making mice “unusually big” and the landscape “unusually tiny.” Her “uncanny sense of perspective” creates strange and intriguing spaces that mirror the imaginative space of Monkey’s cellar. This space that appears in both Carole’s and Monkey’s paintings “deploys and appears to move elsewhere without difficulty; into other times, and on different plane of dream and memory” (Bachelard 53).

Bachelard theorizes this characteristic of postmodern space by arguing that spaces have the potential to defy time, to emerge from memories and dreams, like the “beautiful country” Monkey sees in the cellar and Susan’s memories of Bobby’s infidelity. Carole’s creative space reappears in Monkey’s paintings, bringing a piece of Carole into the future despite her death, revealing the ability of imagined space to break through old conceptions of boundaries

In the new domestic space existing in the realms of imagination, Susan’s deceased mother returns through the creative spaces of art, removing the limits placed on female subjectivity by patriarchal structures. Though Susan wonders briefly if her mother had actually never died when she first sees the paintings, she immediately dismisses the idea as foolish. Instead, Susan appreciates the paintings as a memory, as her mother in a different form. The paintings are “the same yet not the same,” with Carole’s “sensibility recognized and honored, adored even, yet transfigured. Which is the only way the dead come back in *this* world” (Davis, *The Walking Tour*, 259). Though Carole is dead, her influence and “sensibility” live on through Monkey’s interpretations of her artwork, allowing Carole to come back to Susan again. Carole’s essence survives death, existing in the creative spaces of art. Like the dead housewives of *Hell*, Carole’s return in art disrupts notions of the “crisp outlines of the “monadic” model” (Kirby 34). In contemporary postmodern and feminist theories, the idea of the powerful and independent

individual have dissolved into the infinite, inverted, chaotic potentials for female subjectivity. Carole's return to Susan negates the clear delineations that traditionally define, and perhaps limit, the self. Through art and imagined spaces, Carole's subjectivity "inevitably [undergoes] unpredictable mutations," leaving behind "outlines" for limitless possibilities (Kirby 34). With Carole's identity surviving in art, Susan realizes infinite possibilities for defining herself in the world Monkey has shown her. Though Carole only experiences the agency allowed in imaginative spaces in death, Susan survives the loss of old models, living within the creative space of the cellar at the end of the novel. Davis posits that femininity "defies enclosure and closure, partitioning and autonomy" and is ultimately "boundaryless" (Kirby 139). Carole and Susan embody the impossibility of imprisoning femininity. With the advent of imagined and creative spaces, women's subjectivity undergoes a radical liberation, defying the physical restrictions of four patriarchal walls.

In *The Walking Tour*, Davis explores a new way for women to live in the chaos of a contemporary world, creating liberated spaces and subjectivities that thrive in imagination and art. Continuing with the theme of decaying traditional domestic spaces in *Hell*, Susan's old-fashioned mansion slowly dissolves. Susan leaves behind the patriarchal private sphere in favor of Monkey and the "mischief" that can be worked by the human mind. With his assistance, Susan imagines a revolutionary home space and an emancipated identity in creative expression. Through imagination, the cellar and art, Susan discovers a home that can survive the doom of her post-apocalyptic world. Davis plays with the limitless possibilities of postmodern chaos, creating spaces and women that engage with the infinite potentials found in inverting and abandoning traditional norms. From annihilating oppressive private spheres and the women within them in *Hell*, Davis moves to a reconciled, though imaginative and ultimately unrealistic

home in *The Walking Tour*. In her most recent novel, *The Thin Place*, Davis finally realizes an actual home space that effectively answers the dilemma of how contemporary women can live within the home.

### ***The Thin Place***

In *The Thin Place*, Davis shifts from dissecting traditional gendered forms of space to imagining an entirely new, but realistic, model. Having already established that the private domestic sphere no longer functions effectively in both *Hell* and *The Walking Tour*, Davis now develops a choral novel that revolves around the small and average American community of Varennes populated by eccentric community members. Attention shifts to each town member throughout the novel, emphasizing relationships and communal interactions instead of focusing on the journey of a central character. In order to determine how women live within this community space, two female characters will be examined for this thesis: Mees, an odd sixth grade girl, and Billie, a single and unattractive middle aged woman. These women stand on the fringe of the traditional domestic model acting as mediators between their normal community and outside spaces. Through these women and the narrator, Varennes reveals itself to be “the thin place,” a place of liminality between the spiritual world, the natural world and the physical world of humans. This liminal potential allows the community to grow beyond traditional domestic limits, incorporating the incomprehensible spiritual world and the natural environment surrounding the homes. From this threshold, a revolutionary form of domestic space that incorporates outside spaces like nature and spirituality emerges, giving women agency in the creation of a nonhierarchical, malleable idea of home that can survive the ever-changing and interconnected reality of a contemporary world.

The town of Varennes surfaces at the outset of the novel as a typical American community, one defined by the banality of town papers and the comforts of modern homes. The *Varennes Voice*, the town's paper, circulates dull information to support the domestic cohesion of the community. The police log consists of everything from accidents, such as the "[h]it-and-run accident on Tucker's Gore Road" (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 43), to the wanderings of wild animals, like the "[b]ear reported in Terrace Street yard" (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 19). The sporadic inclusion of the police log reinforces the image of Varennes as a traditional domestic space of back yards, cars, and silly street names. Varennes begins as a delineated community governed solely by the concerns of its human inhabitants. The contemporary homes full of modern comforts that populate Varennes add to this normative setting. When a storm causes the power to go out, momentary panic ensues. But, almost immediately, "the power came back, restoring the warm cheerful glow of the desk lamp. Motors began humming; life kept marching on" (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 109). Varennes can only "[keep] marching on" with the "cheerful glow" of a desk lamp and the "humming" of machines. The dull details of the domestic define the homes and the people of Varennes. Thus, similar to Davis' previous novels, Varennes begins like every other tradition-oriented, contemporary and comfortable town, fitting into the old model of 19<sup>th</sup> century divided spaces.

But rather than centering on one home, *The Thin Place* revolves around community interactions which primarily occur in the church, the place that serves as the central domestic space of Varennes. Davis extensively catalogues the places where each community member sits, as "certain members of the congregation had come to prefer certain pews and to have established something resembling squatter's rights" (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 116). The community members sit in the same seats every week, "resembling squatter[s]" in their insistence on having the same

space, their space, each week. Davis' detailed outline of the community members' habits in the church emphasizes the weight that traditions carry for Varennes. The town members cling to social norms to dictate not only where people sit in church but also how community members interact with the outside world. When a deranged woman enters the church and disrupts the service, the church goes immediately take action to protect the sacred space of their church. Their petition to rid her from the church reads, "'We the undersigned do hereby respectfully urge the timely eviction from the premises of St. Luke's church any and all person hostile to or disruptive of our right to worship God as we see fit'" (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 132). While stressing polite and socially acceptable words, like "respectfully" and "timely," the undertone of the petition is forceful and insistent, demanding the removal of "hostile" people that violate their social expectations of decorum and custom. The church's importance to the community, evidenced through their adamant defense of the space, mirrors Michel Foucault theories of traditional spatial relations. Beginning in the Middle Ages, there "was a hierarchic ensemble of places: sacred places and profane places" (Foucault 15). At the start of the novel, the spaces of Varennes function in a hierarchy, with a differentiation between sacred spaces, namely the church, and lesser spaces, like the old people's home or the school. The sacred and traditional church of Varennes stands separate and above the rest of the town, dominating a community based on old domestic expectations. None of the community members violate this traditional model until Davis introduces two innovative female characters that slowly dissolve these normative hierarchies.

Billie, a middle aged and active community member, experiences the patriarchal constraints of Varennes as "a prison," and therefore chooses to live on the edge of the town, communing with nature instead. When first introduced to her, the narrator wonders: "why on



earth had Billie invited her neighbors for dinner when she could be paddling her canoe across Black Lake instead?” (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 26). She spends most of her time wishing to be near the lake and enjoying the natural world instead of dealing with other people and domestic concerns. Though “her ever-hopeful in-laws” had “never given up on trying to turn her into a homemaker,” Billie firmly resists the traditional roles ascribed to women in the home (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 38). She therefore spends the majority of her time outside watching beavers build a dam. While the rest of the town begins to take action to eliminate the beavers because of their disruption of Varennes’ idyllic landscape, Billie hesitates, feeling compelled to protect the beavers. Because of her strong association with nature, Billie “felt physically sick every time some wildlife biologist referred to the autumn ‘deer harvest.’ Meanwhile she was planning to buy herself a Havahart trap” (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 87). Billie responds to the community’s attempts to kill the beavers by seeking out a middle ground, the “Havahart trap,” as a way to save both the beavers and her connections to Varennes. Instead of destroying the beavers Billie tries to relocate them, sparing their lives but still removing them from the human space of Varennes. She navigates a space that simultaneously respects her human neighbors and the natural world. This small gesture reveals Billie’s desire to include the natural world in her idea of home, allowing her to act as a channel that expands the community of Varennes to include nature.

Mees, an odd middle-school-aged girl, similarly attempts to expand the traditional community space of Varennes through her spiritual gift of bringing people back to life. In the first chapter, Mees stumbles upon Carl Banner, who has just suffered a stroke. Mees reattaches Carl’s soul to his body, bringing him back from the dead. In return for saving Carl (the other characters have no idea she actually brought him back from the dead), the Banners invite her to dinner. But Mees would rather be outside by the lake with her dog, Margaret, and Jesus. Mees

can speak with Jesus, who represents the spiritual world: “there’d be that first little invisible hand slipping shyly into yours, but so shyly to begin with it wasn’t so much like *slipping into* as *slipping through*” (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 28). The “invisible hand” of Jesus functions as a representation of the entire spiritual world that Mees can feel, can even “[*slip*] *through*.” Mees’ strange ability allows her to transcend not only domestic spaces but all human spaces. Leaving behind any traditional notions of human space, she can move across the barrier between the material world and the spiritual world. She challenges Varennes’ domestic limitations and traditions by traveling outside of the traditional community and allowing the unknown afterlife “[*slip*] *through*” into Varennes as well.

The normative town of Varennes begins to experience strange spatial mutations with the assistance of Billie and Mees, but also through the intrusive narrator that repeatedly situates the novel in a greater global community. The novel begins with a note from the narrator: “This was in the early years of the twenty-first century, the unspeakable having happened so many times everyone was still in shock, still reeling from what they’d seen, what they’d done or failed to do” (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 3). The story starts in the context of contemporary “unspeakable” problems, which could refer to anything from 9/11 to environmental degradation. In tandem with these current issues, the narrator notes that “[t]he dead souls no longer wore gowns. They’d gotten loose, broadcasting their immense soundless chord through the precincts of the living” (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 3). Instead of remaining in their separated, sacred space, the dead have now “gotten loose” and begun their invasion of “the precincts of the living.” The hierarchical and traditional spaces mentioned by Foucault have thus dissolved, entering into a postmodern era where hierarchies and boundaries cease to function. Now “unspeakable” global problems, which could include anything from environmental issues to wars in other countries find relevance in

Varennnes while the dead wander freely. Separated spaces attributed with different characteristics in the traditional model have now collapsed. Space has changed, and, according to Foucault, “[w]e are in an epoch in which space is given to us in the form of relations between emplacements” (Foucault 15). The spaces of this new era no longer hold intrinsic values, but rather exist only in relation to other spaces, resulting in the destruction of barriers and the building of wide-spread communal relationships. In this model, the home does not sit separate from other spaces, forcing the women within them to remain isolated, untouchable status symbols. In Foucault’s and the narrator’s conceptions of contemporary space, all spaces stand equally interrelated and dependent upon one another. Thus, the old barriers that separated the home, isolating the women within, dissolve.

Davis furthers the collapse of hierarchal and traditional models by not only situating the tiny community within a global context, but also within the immense scheme of the universe. Interspersed chapters take the reader out of Varennnes and into a world of uncertainties regarding the place of human activity in a vast universe. In one such chapter, the narrator states that the Earth “seems solid enough” three times (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 34). The repetition of “seems” questions human perceptions of the planet, implying that man’s vision is too limited to completely comprehend the universe or man’s place within it. The narrator further emphasizes the smallness of humanity by noting that “[t]he great belt of the zodiac undergoes continual minute adjustment – Mercury in retrograde, the war on terror going badly” (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 191). The narrator casually mentions “the war on terror” as a “minute adjustment” in the immense and endless universe. Through these interjections by the narrator, Davis situates the town of Varennnes and humanity as a whole as only one small piece of a vast, interconnected

web. Varennes, in an era of “relations between emplacements,” can no longer stand isolated and self-sufficient as it did in the previous, traditional model of spaces.

The spiritual world and the idea of the afterlife begin to invade the small town as well, bringing the eventuality of death to all of the community members. In the nursing home, an elderly but feisty woman named Helen comments on the certainty of death which is always present in a nursing home. She references Emily Dickinson, thinking, “if, like the woman from New Jersey, you couldn’t bear to stop for anything, Death included, you could be sure Death would kindly stop for you” (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 16). In the poem “Because I could not stop for Death,” Dickinson describes how death, despite attempts to hustle busily through life avoiding the impending end, will catch up with everyone. Death does in fact stop for the residents of the nursing home when death came “only last week for poor Anita Sommers, screaming her head off up there on the third floor before the horses arrived with their heads toward Eternity” (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 16). Though the people of Varennes find leaving the human world behind for a great unknown terrifying, “the woman from New Jersey” and Anita Sommers, just like every other character in the book, are unable to escape their eventual ends. As the novel goes on, death becomes more prevalent as the presence of the spiritual world in Varennes increases. The narrator interrupts the pace of the novel more frequently, reminding readers repeatedly that death is “the one thing you can reasonably predict” (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 195). With an increasing awareness of the inevitability of death, Varennes further expands its interconnectedness with other spaces, defining itself in relationship to the afterlife and the “dead souls” that now wander through the spaces of the living.

The slow shifting of Varennes from traditional domestic space to an expanded, contemporary community reaches a final climax in the church of Varennes on Pentecost, when

the spiritual and natural world make their presence known to the community members. On Pentecost, a day in the Christian liturgical calendar that commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, the entire community gathers in the church for the service. But this holiday proves literal for Varennes, a town already experiencing spiritual and natural invasions. On this day, the narrator notes, “the spirit came down and said, Listen to me!” (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 269). This emphatic demand by the Holy Ghost for the people of Varennes to recognize the spiritual world manifests itself in an unexpected hold up at the church. Two outsiders enter the church with a knife and a gun, grabbing Billie and another woman while demanding money. Interrupted in their plans by a crazy bald woman, one of the men and Billie are shot. In addition to the literal invasion of these outsiders, both the Holy Ghost and nature intrude through Mees’ dog, Margaret. Out of nowhere, Margaret charges into the church and the Holy Ghost speaks through the dog, saying, “Beloved” (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 271). The Holy Spirit literally enters the space of the church, demanding the people of Varennes to listen through the voice of nature, a dog. Varennes, the human community, communes with both the animal and the spirit world in the space of the church, breaking down any remaining boundaries between places and in the process creating a limitless, interconnected community.

In this moment of disturbance, the church morphs into an expanded domestic space full of infinite potential, mirroring Bachelard’s postmodern creations of the home. Bachelard argues that “an immense cosmic house is a potential of every dream of houses” (Bachelard 51). Though the church begins as a patriarchal and hierarchical space, the intrusion of the Holy Ghost and Margaret reconstruct the church into “an immense cosmic house.” The church grows into its full potential, a space in which animals, ghosts and people all interact and communicate. This infinite house allows the dwellers “to inhabit the universe. Or, to put it differently, the universe

comes to inhabit the house” (Bachelard 51). Bachelard’s theories come to fruition as the Holy Ghost literally “comes to inhabit the house,” bringing with it the spiritual and natural world. The community of Varennes thus becomes a community that includes the entire universe, functioning through its interdependent relations with other places. Davis uses this expanded and limitless community space to replace the outdated and oppressive models of domestic space.

The inhabitants of Varennes realize their interconnected place in the world as they reimagine their domestic space to accommodate an awareness of the place of man in the infinite universe around him. After the invasion of the church, the narrative voice comments upon the realization that one character, Piet, makes: “[y]ou could try to make sense out of the universe, but you were too small and the parts you needed to see were too large or even smaller” (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 267). Piet realizes through this violent, unexplainable invasion of their traditional sacred space that the activities of Varennes, from the silly street names to the church pews, exist as only one small piece of the vast universe. He, and the other characters, “could try to make sense out of the universe,” but they will ultimately fail to comprehend its immense scope. This lack of knowledge; however, does not condemn the community to doom and destruction. Rather, Davis rehabilitates Varennes with a new, communal mentality that intimately connects humanity and domestic spaces to the spiritual and natural world. When Billie awakens in the hospital having recovered from her gunshot wound, the narrator concludes, in the final line of the novel, that “[i]t was the first morning of the world. It was the first morning of the world, and later it was finished” (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 275). Billie awakens within the context of “the first morning of the world,” indicating that Varennes has been reborn through its encounter with the animal and spiritual worlds. Varennes survives, transforming into a domestic

space based on communal relationships with all places in the universe, a domestic space that thrives in a chaotic postmodern world.

The town of Varennes endures this invasion, revealing the importance of maintaining a functional domestic space for humanity's survival. At this point in her career, Davis allows the homes to survive, appreciating the necessity of the domestic for sustaining human identity. For Young, despite the many problems of inhabiting traditional homes for women, a home space must be saved because it "does not fix identity but anchors it in physical being that makes a continuity between past and present. Without such anchoring of ourselves in things, we are, literally, lost" (Young 140). Though *The Walking Tour* introduces intriguing possibilities for a subjectivity completely created in the imagination, *The Thin Place* offers a reconciled home that allows humanity to physically live in postmodern chaos. The surviving town of Varennes provides a space for the inhabitants to "[anchor]" themselves to reality. Varennes thus retains the essential qualities of domestic spaces, protecting humanity's past and present identities. While keeping these traits, Davis also suggests an answer to the problem of traditional, patriarchal domestic spaces that only value male subjectivity posed by her narrator: "Everyone prefers to stick with the subject of people, but how shortsighted to leave out the question of how we got here and where we're going" (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 12). To survive in a world of relational spaces, a world of unpredictability and inversion, humanity can no longer deny the importance of connections and relationships, to other communities, to nature and to the past. Nature, in particular, cannot be abused and ignored by humanity any longer. Davis creates a community no longer "shortsighted," but rather aware of essential relationships to other times, other places and other worlds. Davis' final Varennes is an expansive and fluid domestic space

that grounds humanity's various and changing identities while also building connections that help humanity survive in a vast and unpredictable contemporary space.

For Mees, this creation of an expanded community normalizes her, taking away her spiritual gift in exchange for a self-determined, human subjectivity. When Mees tries to save the robber, her friend Sunny intrudes, refusing to let Mees complete her mission of saving him. Sunny refuses to let go of Mees, and as a result "the worst, the absolute worst" thing happens, and Mees loses her ability to channel the spiritual world (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 270). While the community expands to accommodate the Holy Ghost and the animal world, Mees' spiritual and imaginative subjectivity defined by her gift vanishes, grounding her in a physical reality instead. In the final chapter, which chronicles the eventual deaths of all the community members, the narrator states that "Mees became normal" after that fateful day (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 275). Mees turns into "[a] tractable girl, a mediocre student" who "could no longer save the life of anything, human or otherwise" (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 275). Mees transitions from a liminal being to a normal member of Varennes and finds subjectivity grounded in her humanity instead of the spiritual world. With the restructuring of Varennes to incorporate the Holy Ghost, Mees' function as a channel for Jesus becomes obsolete. Though no longer extraordinary, Mees emerges in the new Varennes as a more integrated member of the community. In the communal, relational model of spaces that no longer isolates women, Mees and the rest of the women of Varennes are able to build their own identities and spaces.

Billie awakens after her gunshot wound with an awareness of interconnected spaces and communities, discovering a way to exist with agency in an era of constant change. When Billie is shot, she leaves the reality of the human world behind, hanging on the threshold between human life and the afterlife. After the epilogue lists the eventual deaths of all the characters, the



narrator returns to the mind of Billie. Lying unconscious on a hospital bed, Billie dreams of “her life” as a beach. “She looked back toward the beach for one second, just one little second, and the water was suddenly all gone and there was a huge wave taking shape on the horizon” (Davis, *The Thin Place*, 275). Suddenly Billie awakes, escaping the impending wave for “just one little second.” The narrator does not include Billie in her list of the dead. Instead Billie returns to life with a greater understanding of her place in the world, including her relationship to spirituality and nature. Though her death, that “huge wave,” is inevitable, at the moment Billie survives. Waking up on “the first morning of the world,” Billie holds the hope for the future in her by appreciating interconnectedness and by building an expanded community space that respects nature. Davis uses Billie to represent how contemporary women can live in domestic spaces of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Living within these shifting and relational spaces, Billie’s “[p]ersonal identity... is not at all fixed, but always in the process” (Young 140). Billie adapts to her changing environment by respecting the interwoven reality of nature, spirituality and her human community. Billie moves freely through each of these spaces and in the process, creates an identity of her own. Billie embodies Young’s notion that “[w]e are not the same from one moment to the next, one day to the next, one year to the next, because we dwell in the flux of interaction and history” (Young 140). At the end of the novel, Billie defines and adapts her own identity as a woman, no longer limited by traditional, patriarchal expectations or spaces. She and the rest of the women in *The Thin Place* successfully build their own spaces and subjectivities, finding agency through relational, nonhierarchical and malleable domestic spaces.

In *The Thin Place*, Davis creates a liberating model of the domestic based on relationships with other spaces which functions without boundaries or hierarchies, allowing women to inhabit the home with an identity of their own. No longer isolated as untouchable

status symbols within the private sphere, the women of Varennes become equal members of a community that does not divide spaces, locking women away in the home. Instead, the Mees and Billie actively construct a new model of the domestic that integrates the public and the private as well as nature and spirituality. *The Thin Place* represents Davis' reconciliation of the domestic sphere, adapting the home to meet the needs of a chaotic, porous, and relationship-driven postmodern reality. The home is no longer annihilated or abandoned, but rather reformed as a way to maintain humanity's sense of self in the face of an unpredictable contemporary moment.

### ***Conclusion***

The debate over the home and the housewife sprang into the political and social spotlight of the United States in recent years due to the growth of both the New Right and the second wave feminist movement, revealing a culture torn between patriarchal norms and revolutionary equality for men and women. Davis' novels take up this dispute, examining modern homes and the women within them as she navigates both the unpleasant history of women's oppression in the home and the vehement rejection of the domestic by more radical feminists. But Davis' attempt to compromise stands separate from the majority of images of women in American popular culture, most of which strongly emphasize conservative, patriarchal norms. Despite the gains of second wave feminism in providing greater equality for women in a variety of arenas, including the workforce, popular media images of women focus on traditional ideals that repeat old gender expectation placing women within the home. Though Davis searches for a tangible and equitable middle ground that improves women's status while maintaining the humanity of the home, most representations of the housewife in popular culture expose a trend back to the sexist, repressive model of domestic spaces.

Popular television shows dominate media images of housewives and homes, enjoying incredible popularity for their reinforcement of patriarchal social norms that limit women's agency. Bravo's reality TV show *The Real Housewives of Orange County* spawned a franchise of similar shows that promise to give viewers an insight into the lives of the "modern housewife." These few elite and wealthy women have come to typify "housewife" in American popular culture, revealing the extent to which patriarchal constraints which tout the importance of women in the home and only in the home inform American consciousness. In describing one of the women, the show's website states: "Alexis still believes that husband Jim is her king and savior and runs the show" (Bravo). Alexis' idolization of her husband and her subservience to him define her on the show. Her image insists that successful and beautiful housewives, America's "ideal" women, defer to the wishes of their husbands. The contemporary housewife created on *The Real Housewives of Orange County* gives up her identity and her dreams in order to serve her husband, harkening back to pre-second wave feminist ideas of the proper place of women in an oppressively patriarchal society. Despite some societal shifts that allow women more opportunity outside of the home, this dominant popular culture image of women in *The Real Housewives* reinforces old ideas that "good" women passively obey their husbands.

*Real Housewives* further emphasizes a backlash against the gender equity promoted by second wave feminists by negative repeating connotations associated with working women who has left their role in the home behind. *The Real Housewives of Orange County* demonstrates this trend when describing another character: "Vicki has built an empire with her insurance business, but her constant drive is having negative results at home" (Bravo). The reality show frames Vicki's career in the public realm with a focus on the "negative results at home," implying that a woman's choice to leave the private sphere upsets traditional family dynamics. How her career

affects her duties as a housewife completely eclipses Vicki's impressive achievement in "[building] an empire with her insurance business." Though women have increased their presence in the workforce in recent years, the media focuses on how these women violate traditional and patriarchal expectations, disrupting rather than improving society. Far from offering an image of the average American woman attempting to move between a career and the home while maintaining an identity of her own, popular images portrayed by shows like *The Real Housewives* series constrain women to the role of housewife.

Despite the proliferation of traditional views of the home and the housewife in contemporary America, as evidenced in the media's conservative images of women, Davis strives to imagine a domestic space between the extremes of the debate. *The Real Housewives of Orange County* and similar shows currently define the housewife in America, revealing the strength of the contemporary conservative backlash. But Davis' novels, rather than accepting the predominant cultural standpoint, defend a woman's right to not only choose an identity and role in society, but also a woman's right to be respected and valued no matter what choice she makes. Her novels therefore speak an important and powerful truth: the possibility for compromise exists if a society values a woman's agency to make her own choices and define her own identity, both inside and outside of the home.

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